

## POSITIONING IDENTITY IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED DISCOURSE AMONG ESOL LEARNERS

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The present study explores a linguistic mechanism in which the identity of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners can be influenced online. Analyzing the discourse of ESOL chat room participants and how they uptake positioning statements through online conversations, we present two vignettes that illustrate the kind of discourse in which participants position one another as language learners. We apply a discourse analysis framework of joint projects and positioning to an online context for ESOL learners to understand the processes by which identity is formed via online discourse. In both vignettes of online discourse, we examine the linguistic processes through which ESOL learners' language identity was positioned and formed. This article supports the importance of examining identity positioning and language learning in the online setting. We discuss implications for how online chat sessions may foster positive identity development.

**Language(s) Learned in this Study:** English

**Keywords:** Discourse Analysis, Computer-Mediated Communication, L2 Identity

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### INTRODUCTION

Learning a language involves more than simply acquiring the basics of reading, speaking, listening, and writing; interactions in social situations play an important role in the linguistic development of language learners (Duran, 2008). In these interactions, notions of *identity* and a *discourse community* that supports this identity are critical (Chen, 2013; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Street, 1993). In the present study, we used Gee's (2000) definition of identity, one that refers to the certain kind of person someone is in a particular context—in this case, learning English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). We analyzed discourse in online chat looking for how identity regarding learning a second language can be positioned. Because of our interest in what we could understand from an analysis of learners' words themselves, we used the discourse produced in online chat, referencing previous work in computer-mediated communication (e.g., Schallert et al., 2009).

### Identity Development in Language Learning: A Social Process

Developing one's identity as a learner is inextricably related to the social context. Learning requires enacting particular identities, and at least at some level, involves making (or remaking) selves and relationships (Moje, 2008). Moreover, learning occurs in discourse communities where identities can be formed (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Gee's (2014b) discourse theory offers a model for framing identity development within social processes. All speakers engage in both *recipient design*—taking into consideration the discourse recipients—and *position design*—considering how speakers would like the

recipient to be, feel, think, and act. Discourse is an inherent mechanism of identity positioning, either assuming the listener's identity or inviting the listener to take on a new one (Gee, 2014a). Similarly, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) defined this notion of relational identity through discourse as "how one identifies one's position relative to others, mediated through the way one feels comfortable or constrained, for example, to speak to another, to command another ..." (p. 127).

Learning a second language involves identity-negotiating processes. Duran (2008) discussed the importance of identity and agency in second language acquisition (SLA): "Language learning and acquisition are social developmental processes as much or more than basic intrapsychological processes. Learning and acquiring [second language] competencies requires becoming a person with identities that can exercise agency in real contexts with other cultural and social beings" (p. 1230). In addition, Goffman (1959) argued that language users self-regulate their communicative practices with others with the intention that their messages and identity are properly understood. Applied to SLA, learners need to be sensitive to not only how they effectively relay the correct message but also how they maintain their identity as a second language user.

Moje and Lewis (2007) further described language learning as participating in power relations and negotiating agency. They elaborated that socialization in discourse communities forcibly shapes learning opportunities. In a related line of work, Lam (2004a, 2009) identified a phenomenon in the marginalization of English as a Second Language (ESL) students from native English speakers at school. For example, the Chinese-speaking students in Lam's (2004a) study reported being laughed at and described the segregation between them and English-speaking Chinese students. Positioned as non-proficient learners of English, ESL students may have felt uncomfortable or unsettled in their sense of identity as ESL students. Research has supported that legitimizing learners' diverse and multifaceted identities is critical for student interest and success (McClure, 2010). For instance, Pavlenko (2004) claimed that students whose voices go unheard may lose interest in language learning.

Lam (2004b) suggested the Internet as a different social medium, where ESL students can acquire second language literacy and achieve the safe expression of their identity. Through online chat, the ESL students in Lam's research adopted new identities emerging from a larger, collective identity of online chatters. Creating a new identity by interacting with similar peers as immigrant English learners, they used online chat as a secret code in which they could communicate, moving from solitude in their American schools to solidarity with other ESOL speakers. The following quote from Lam (2000) captured the social nature of identity development in language learning: "A central construct is the language user's identity, for in practicing any form of literacy, the user is at the same time enacting a particular social role and membership in a particular group" (p. 459).

### **Online Communication and Second Language Acquisition**

Previous research has suggested that both synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) positively influences SLA (e.g., Kern, 1995; Shin, 2006). Online communication fosters growth for language learners in three areas: language skills, equality, and autonomy (Warschauer, 1997). For example, Kern (1995) implemented a program called *Interchange*, a synchronous online chat program, into university-level French courses. Because of the frequent opportunities for language production and student expression, CMC led to increased active participation, grammatical competence and sophistication, and reliance on peers. Similarly, Kelm (1992) demonstrated how *Interchange* increased native English speakers' oral participation in their foreign language courses. Although Kern (2006) argued that CMC should not replace classroom discussions, he posited that CMC can effectively restructure classroom dynamics and enhance the social use of language.

Studies on English language learners have validated the use of CMC not only for linguistic and cognitive boosts but also for noncognitive and motivation gains. Examining students' views on a synchronous online discussion in a writing class, Meunier (1998) found that students reported high level of situational

and task motivation. Cross-culturally, studies in Asia also reported that students exhibited high levels of motivation and enjoyment communicating in their second language using synchronous online chat (Freiermuth & Huang, 2012). Opportunities to express oneself, craft personal profiles, and develop a sense of community around shared interests motivated individuals to engage in CMC (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013). Comparing interactions during face-to-face and online discussions in language classrooms, Jarrell and Freiermuth (2005) found that Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students reported online chat as being a motivating tool and discussed a number of motivating reasons. First, students felt less pressure to respond using online chat and appreciated the choice to contribute at their own pace. Second, online chat afforded anonymity and reduction of social barriers, leading to greater focus on message content instead of participant characteristics (see Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997). Third, they found that EFL students were more willing to communicate and that they sustained English conversation with less switching to Japanese in CMC. Other motivational factors discussed in previous research included stimulating connections with diverse and international partners as well as the facilitation of meaningful projects (e.g., Warschauer, 1996).

One facet of CMC is the sense of safety and its resultant empowerment to share one's inner voice (Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996), which may promote motivation to participate in further online communication. Beauvois (1992) investigated English native speakers' learning French through CMC. According to the findings, students reported more freedom to express themselves with little risk of rejection and described online learning as the most fruitful in their second language production. Comparing online and face-to-face interactions, research has indicated that non-native speakers feel more comfortable and less worried about their language deficiencies in the online context compared to in-person contexts (Freiermuth, 2001; Warschauer, 1996). Focusing on the words online chatters used, Schallert et al. (2009) examined the linguistic markers of politeness and face-saving. When writing messages with functions that were more directed to others (e.g., evaluating another's message, presenting a contrasting view, or managing the conversation), students worried more about possible face threats and used more politeness strategies to mitigate such imposition. That is, the words themselves seemed to have fostered a safer environment.

A study by Kramsch, A'Ness, and Lam (2000) documented the experiences of a Chinese immigrant high school student who experienced frustration and discrimination because of his Chinese accent while speaking English. Through his involvement with CMC, he grew in his confidence and comfort level with communicating in English. Kramsch et al. explained such a shift was due to changing physical properties from printed books and face-to-face conversations to the electronic medium. CMC facilitated the process in which this student created a fictional self, blurring the boundary lines that positioned his social identity as a linguistic minority. In this process, second language learners could build a stronger sense of identity through their own version of reality and reify their own voice in identifiable social contexts.

In sum, previous theory and research has underscored the importance of identity development and the social context in language learning. Moreover, CMC is a medium that motivates dialogue, forms discourse communities, and develops new identities through social positioning as second language learners. Our study investigates online discourse and underlying mechanisms of the motivational, social, and identity-forming processes in CMC.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

We used an analytical framework to identify how ESOL students jointly negotiated their identities in online chat. We used a selection of chat transcripts and applied a framework using *joint projects* (Clark, 1996) and *positioning* (Wortham, 2004) to identify and analyze instances of identity positionality within online discourse.

Our analytical framework integrated Gee's (2014a) critical approach to discourse analysis with Mercer's

(2007) sociocultural discourse analysis. Gee (2014a) described critical discourse analysis as not merely describing words that people use, but speaking to institutional or social problems and issues in the world. These issues often involve the possession and distribution of social capital. We too analyzed language as intricately tied to social goods that are traded, in particular, examining the capital of one's identity being distributed by online participants. Using Mercer's (2007) sociocultural discourse approach, we operated under the basic assumption that we were able to examine collective thinking activities enabled through language processes. Sociocultural discourse analysis afforded us the assessment of linguistic processes through which individuals strive for intersubjectivity. Kramsch et al. (2000) described this notion as identity constructed through discourse. Framed by critical discourse analysis and sociocultural discourse analysis, we examined a series of discourse interactions called joint projects.

### Joint Projects

Clark and Schaefer (1989) defined *discourse* as "a sequence of utterances produced as the participants proceed turn by turn" (p. 259). Discourse involves both participants in a highly coordinated activity ensuring what is said is attended to, heard, and understood. In pursuit of communication goals, engagement in discourse involves the monitoring of the uptake of utterances in social contexts and the subsequent adjustment (Duran, 2008). To capture this dynamic, we analyzed discourse interactions called *joint projects* (Clark, 1996). Clark defined a joint project as "a joint action projected by one of its participants and taken up by the others" (p. 191). According to Clark (1996), the four types of uptake are as follows:

1. Full compliance: Respondents may comply fully with the project as proposed.
2. Alteration of project: Respondents may alter the proposed project to something they are able and willing to comply with.
3. Declination of project: When respondents are unable or unwilling to comply with the project as proposed, they may decline to take it up.
4. Withdrawal from project: Respondents may also withdraw entirely, for example, by deliberately ignoring the question and changing the topic.

Clark (1996) described the process in achieving such joint purposes as "negotiation" (p. 203), in which participants set forth a possible joint project and show what they are willing to accomplish individually and collectively. Eventually, the two interlocutors establish mutual belief that both have identified the purpose and the means to achieve it. We opted to use joint projects as our framework to explicitly examine how identity positioning is taken up by others and to complement the notions of social exchange in Gee's (2014a) approach and collective thinking in Mercer's (2007) approach.

### Positioning

One of the central and inherent works of discourse is positioning, language that assumes or claims a particular identity for the listener (Gee, 2014a). One definition of positioning is "an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual in an event that takes place across seconds, minutes, or hours" (Wortham, 2004, p. 166). In a classroom-based study, Wortham observed how primary school teachers and students positioned a particular student (i.e., explicitly used identity-related labels) and how these verbal terms affected student identity. In particular, he examined through classroom discourse how an exemplary student became someone who was no longer viewed as a contributing student, but instead as an oppositional presence.

In the Wortham (2004) study, one example of how the teacher in this classroom explicitly positioned the student occurred when they were engaged in a large group discussion. The positioned student was asked a question, and she guessed haphazardly instead of looking at the text. In response, the teacher evaluated her behavior followed by "... exactly what you do as a bad student ...". Labeling her a bad student, the

teacher explicitly positioned her as a student who did not try to find the right answer, but just guessed arbitrarily. One caveat is that we hoped to provide an example of positioning and not necessarily negative labeling.

Wortham (2004) argued that you can position yourself and embrace an identity, and in the preceding case, the positioned learner identified as a bad student eventually outwardly flaunted social norms and acted in opposition to the teachers. Positioning can take various forms: self-deprecating statements (*I'm stupid*) that can sometimes be modest defenses to a compliment, positive statements towards the self (*I'm a good student*), and descriptive statements that portray a personal quality or ability (*I am a musician*) or membership in a community (*I am Latino*). These statements are explicit forms of positioning, utterances that place a recognizable identity category to an individual. These statements differ from implicitly positioning which indirectly identifies an individual. For example, the statement *I am practicing a piece for a recital* is an implicit positioning that conveys the meaning of *I am a pianist* or *I am a musician*. Another positioning statement can be *I can help you with your math homework*, which indirectly portrays confidence or the ability to teach.

The notion of *thickening* is also discussed by Wortham (2004), defined as “the increasing presupposability of an individual’s identity over ontogenetic time, as the individual and others come increasingly to think of and position him or her as a recognizable kind of person” (p. 166). In his case study, he commented how the identity of the good student gone bad was thickened via the influence of others, perpetuating the positioning through their behavior and speech towards her.

The kind of positioning that we were interested in involves one’s status as an ESOL learner. This characteristic can be positioned by identifying one’s attitudes towards learning (in English specifically), one’s intelligence, academic achievement, or language capabilities. We looked for these particular features in positioning statements because we argue that they are linguistic ways in which an identity as an English learner can be influenced and developed. We label such statements as *positioning statements towards learning*.

## Present Study

Using a sociocultural and critical approach to discourse analysis (Gee, 2014a; Mercer, 2007), we examine the online chat of ESOL learners for evidence of identity-positioning statements. Moreover, through this peer interaction, we were interested in capturing how positioning statements are taken up and the resulting intersubjectivity that emerged from the discourse. Using a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods and applying Mercer’s (2007) approach to sociocultural discourse analysis, we were guided by two research questions:

1. From a quantitative approach to assess the relative incidence of the positioning statements, how often do ESOL students make positioning statements related to learning English?
2. From a qualitative approach to understand the relationships among interactions that occur in the conversations, what kind of identity-positioning occurs and are positioning statements being taken up in regards to joint purposes?

As a caveat, we wanted to clarify that the scope of this article is limited to applying tools of grounding joint projects and positioning in analyzing the interactions that occur in ESOL learner chat. Note that we do not take into account the background of the ESOL students or how their proficiency of English has changed over time. In our study, we focused on a snapshot of linguistic instances in which ESOL students produce and uptake identity-positioning statements.

## METHOD

We excerpted conversations from a public online chat medium called [EnglishClub.com](http://EnglishClub.com), described as a

meeting place of ESOL learners. (We opted to use the term ESOL when describing our study and participants, instead of ESL and EFL, because of the ambiguity of whether English was their second or foreign language.) Along with a simple chat interface, there was a toolbar with options to customize fonts and colors as well as insert emoticons. We recorded chat sessions over a three-day period. Dividing the period into 30-minute sections, we then used a lottery method to choose 10 chat sessions to analyze. To fairly assess the prevalence of positioning statements and to avoid cultural bias originating from time zones when the chat occurred, we opted for a random selection of online chat, risking the lack of contiguity in excerpted conversations.

Borrowing methodology from previous discourse analysis work in CMC (see Jordan et al., 2012; Schallert et al., 2009), we cut and pasted the dialogue that naturally occurred. Following the various threads in the conversation was very difficult; multiple conversations were taking place and teasing apart the various turns became a sizeable obstacle. When comments did not begin with a direct address, we evaluated if turns belonged to specific sequences by seeing if the topic was conditionally relevant to previous turns (see Schallert et al., 1996). We provide in brackets our interpretation of the turns if there was difficulty interpreting the message.

### Participants

Due to the nature of the data collection, information regarding the ESOL students was limited. We were able to collect their usernames, avatars, and utterances. Other participant characteristics were inferred from their text-based conversations. Because inquiring age and country of origin was a common conversation topic in the chat room, we speculated that members were between the ages of 18 and 26, most likely college students, and originating from diverse cultural backgrounds such as Vietnam, China, Mexico, Italy, Peru, Iran, and Argentina. Note that this information was not verifiable given the anonymous nature of the setting and our inability to link chatter demographics with accuracy, under the assumption that these chatters could be masking their true identity.

In the two vignettes we analyzed, there were four participants: Maria, Kevin, Bui, and Leon (pseudonyms were used). Maria was a female participant originating from a Spanish-speaking country. She seemed to know many members in the chat room as she was often asked questions from multiple members. Also from a Spanish-speaking country, Kevin was a male participant who was a relatively “talkative” member (posted more than average). Bui was a male participant who speaks Vietnamese, and he often used sarcasm and made jokes with other members. Leon, a Spanish-speaking male, was relatively quiet (contributed less than average).

### Data Analysis

A common criticism to our analytic framework that we want to discuss before proceeding is the problem of validity or interpretation of discourse. Cameron (2001) outlined some responses to the problem of interpretation especially when participants are not available to validate the analysis. First, she ruled out the *infinite variety* argument, that texts simply cannot be interpreted with any reading the researcher may produce. Second, she urged interpretation that is mindful of the whole text and whether lexical choices stay true to the dominant interpretative frame. Third, she acknowledged that there is always potential variation in the interpretation as communication involves inference and background knowledge, but maintained that the analyst can explain a number of different meanings from the same discourse. Last, she recommended the use of an external reference group (e.g., focus groups) to provide corroboration of the discourse analysis.

In order to best validate our analysis, we adhered closely to Cameron’s (2001) recommendations. Since we could not probe into the minds of the speakers themselves, we provided a careful analysis and interpretation of the discourse, keeping in mind that there were “better” interpretations that consider the surrounding context and dominant interpretative frame. In this vein, we used conversation vignettes

instead of isolated statements to better understand our case examples in context. We used a recursive qualitative content analysis of the online contributions (Henri, 1992; Stacey & Gerbic, 2003), which involves a continuous back and forth between theory and data, defining and redefining categories. Specifically, once positioning statements were identified, we examined each turn as well as the surrounding context and how the positioning statement was responded to, using the joint projects and uptake framework as a basis for our coding scheme. A subsequent turn was interpreted as a response to a previous turn to create a joint project. In addition, when appropriate, we provide multiple interpretations making use of pragmatics beyond the text. To provide as much corroboration as possible, the analyses were conducted independently by the authors and verified through multiple rounds of checking to ensure reliability.

### Researchers' Background and Experience

The first two authors conducted the analyses, and in order to establish trustworthiness and to describe any inherent biases, a brief biographical description of our personal and professional characteristics is required (Patton, 1990). Both coders working as researchers, came from an Asian background and had graduate backgrounds in psychology and education; the first author was a native English speaker, and the second author studied English as a second language.

## RESULTS

From the ten chat sessions, there were a total of 2257 content turns. There were 53 turns that were coded as containing positioning statements, yielding a 2.35% prevalence rate. We noted that this frequency was a fairly low rate of prevalence and moved to qualitatively understand the kinds of positioning statements that were made and if they were taken up. The following are two examples of positioning statements:

1. Kevin: It's a phrase for smart people. I am an intelligent person  
Kevin: I am an anthropologist
2. Kevin: how do you do to be so happy all time, Bui?  
Bui: I chat, Kevin =)

In [Example 1](#), Kevin described himself as a smart person, and later an intelligent person. In a subsequent turn, Kevin positioned himself as an anthropologist. Related to characteristics of intelligence and academic achievement, these statements explicitly positioned Kevin as a learner. In [Example 2](#), Kevin was asking Bui why he seems happy all the time, and Bui responded citing his chatting behavior as the reason. This statement reflects Bui's disposition towards chatting: it makes him happy. Since chat is used in an ESOL context, Bui's identity towards learning English is implicitly positioned as positive.

Using Clark's (1996) joint projects as our framework, we identified how students engaged in the uptake process; however, due to the lack of co-presence (typical of face-to-face conversations), many proposals were not taken up, and in a literal sense, were ignored. Since the chat room was often rife with interweaving conversations, proposals that were not considered at all were frequent (they did not necessarily have the significance that deliberate ignoring would—an issue of basic grounding; see Clark, 1996). Freiermuth (2011) discussed this phenomenon of a crowded chat channel and resultant multiple conversations that can occur as well as the inability to engage in dialogue using sequential turn-taking. This occurrence tended to reduce the need for online chatters to establish or hold the floor, but required chatters to juggle multiple topics. Chatters must also maintain interest among others who may become disoriented or ignore turns when trying to keep pace.

To further examine positioning statements as instances of identity-related discourse, we selected two vignettes to highlight the noteworthy and more complex instances of positioning statements towards learning English. The vignettes originated from two different chat sessions.



## Vignette One

In the first vignette (see [Figure 1](#)), Maria proposed a question: “How can I say *buitres*?” She was unsure of how to translate this Spanish word (*buitres* literally means *vulture*, but in slang, it connotes more of a free-loader or someone who rarely pays for anything, relying instead on other people). However, this question was taken up as a discussion on the use of Spanglish, a combination of Spanish and English through code-switching and borrowing (Ardila, 2005).

In Line 1, Maria presented her question to the group. Next, Bui took up Maria’s proposal, but he did not directly respond to it by translating *buitres*; instead Bui made a new proposal, altering the project. Bui may have interpreted Line 1 as an attempt to use only English in the chat room by finding an English equivalent, but he thought there was no problem in borrowing Spanish words in English. Instead, he encouraged the use of Spanglish to also aid his own partial comprehension.

Line	Turn Taken	Joint Project to Position Maria	Joint Project to Position Spanglish Speakers	Joint Project to Position Kevin
1	<b>Maria:</b> bro, how can I say <i>buitres</i>	Maria makes a proposal that she does not know an English equivalent for a word.		
3	<b>Bui:</b> Maria, I see know problem in espanGLISH, coz I didn't understand Spanish	In response to line 1, Bui seems to withdraw from the project, but he makes an alteration to the project.	Bui makes a proposal that there is no problem with Spanglish—code-switching is acceptable.	
4	<b>Kevin:</b> ...what, I understand better English than spanglish... and I'm Spanish speaker		Kevin makes a declination of the project, saying that he understands English better than Spanglish; thus Spanglish is not acceptable.	Kevin makes a proposal that he is better at English than Spanglish.
5	<b>Leon:</b> spanglish!!!!... is harder		Leon is in full compliance with Kevin in line 4 by agreeing that Spanglish might not be acceptable since it is harder.	Leon is in full compliance with Kevin in line 4 by saying that Spanglish is harder.

[Figure 1](#). Vignette 1 transcript and joint projects.

Kevin had taken up what Bui said but also placed new meaning regarding his proposal. He explicitly positioned himself as understanding English better than Spanglish. To Kevin, English on its own without Spanish borrowings (as in Spanglish) was easier to comprehend than Spanglish although he was a Spanish speaker, unlike Bui. In the next line, Leon, who spoke Spanish, agreed that Spanglish was harder; he was in full compliance with Line 4. Leon created common ground with Kevin by accepting the presentation that Kevin displayed, perhaps in full compliance that Kevin was better at English. At the same time, in Line 4, Kevin made a declination of project regarding the acceptability of Spanglish. Stating how he understood English better, he noted his preference for English over Spanglish. In Line 5, Leon declined Line 3 and was in full compliance with Line 4: Bui said that Spanglish is harder—possibly interpreted as unacceptable due in part to the difficulties of understanding it.



In Vignette 1, we identified three joint projects: (1) Maria as a speaker of Spanglish, (2) speaking Spanglish as acceptable, (3) Kevin as better at English than Spanglish. The first joint project of Maria was altered at first by Bui, but not declined or withdrawn, to generalize for all Spanglish speakers as being acceptable. Leading to the second joint project, Bui's proposal was declined twice by both Kevin and Leon in Line 4 and Line 5, respectively, as Leon was in full compliance with Kevin's comment that Spanglish was more difficult to understand, and thus, should not be accepted. The third joint project was positioning Kevin as better at English than Spanglish, and Leon was in full compliance again, agreeing that Spanglish was harder. We believed that each of these joint projects displayed how their identities as language learners were jointly positioned in their online discourse. Maria's identity as a welcomed Spanglish speaker and Kevin's identity as more competent in English speaking receive affirmation from the other chatters as their joint projects of positioning statements were mutually agreed upon.

## Vignette Two

In the second conversation (see Figure 2), Kevin wondered why Bui was not talking for a while (Line 11), and Bui claimed to be practicing his reading skills (Line 13). One interpretation of Kevin's Line 11 was a positioning of Bui, specifically, that his specialty was in speaking, not being silent. However, this positioning statement was never taken up or negotiated.

In Line 13, Bui responded that he was merely reading what other people have been saying, perhaps in hopes of improving his ability to comprehend the conversations taking place. Another interpretation may involve positioning himself as a good student, flaunting that he was rehearsing his English. Maria was in full compliance with Bui's positioning statement of himself, agreeing that what he said was, for the most part, true. She accepted Bui's presentation with a smiling emoticon following his name in Line 14—a sign of approval of the last turn. However, she made an alteration to Bui's proposal by modifying his presentation: she corrected "reading skill" to "reading comprehension." This alteration was further evidence that Maria was in compliance with Bui positioning himself as a good student. By replacing "skill" with "comprehension," perhaps she wanted to use an academic word, something more sophisticated, such as "comprehension" which is frequently used in the classroom. Through Maria's alteration of Bui's learning activity into greater sophistication, perhaps Bui's identity was elevated to a higher status individual who not only practices the skill but also enhances comprehension. Maria's alteration was significant because it displayed her acceptance and agreement that Bui was indeed practicing his reading.

Perhaps in jest, Bui responded in Line 17 that there were no reading comprehension questions. One interpretation is that Bui's response was not necessarily a declination of Maria (although a literal translation would lead others to believe so), but rather, an argument about a vocabulary concern: if his comment was supposed to be reading comprehension, then there should be the appropriate questions. Since such questions are implausible in the online setting, the response was humorous, denoted by the use of smiling emoticons.

In Line 19, Maria altered Bui's proposal and responded by saying she will provide the reading comprehension questions. Not only did she continue to comply with Bui's positioning statement as a student who improves reading ability, but she also positioned herself as a person who can provide these questions, a teacher perhaps with enough authority in reading comprehension. Although this positioning statement can be a humorous attempt at role play, this could have been implicit positioning that she was sufficiently capable in reading comprehension to even offer up this service, even in pretense. In Line 22, Bui was in full compliance with Maria's positioning statement from Line 19. By asking for only yes or no questions, Bui and Maria shared the mutual belief that she can provide such questions.

In response to Bui's positioning of Kevin in Line 13, Kevin responded in Line 20 that he was learning as well. He took up Bui's implicit positioning statement that Kevin was not improving his reading skill by frequently posting, and responded by saying that he is learning too. In Line 13, it was unclear that Bui

was positioning Kevin, but Line 20 retroactively indicated that Bui was positioning Kevin as not practicing reading skills. Bui and Kevin did not share common ground on whether Kevin was also learning, since Kevin was almost taunting back to Bui in disagreement: “I’m learning too!” There were two opposing beliefs with regards to Kevin also being one who practices reading skill. However, Kevin made an interesting alteration when he said “learning” instead of “practicing” reading skill. He may be referring to his behavior as learning by reading as well or he may be assuming that his writing is a form of learning. Regardless of which interpretation, Kevin used a richer term “learning” in response to the activity Bui was engaged in and Kevin was evading in Line 13. Kevin’s statement may be thickening Bui’s identity, a transformation from a student who practices reading comprehension to a learner, with himself included.

Line	Turn Taken	Joint Project to Position Bui	Joint Project to Position Kevin	Joint Project to Position Maria
11	<b>Kevin:</b> where are Bui... silent, is not your spatiality? [Silence, is it not your specialty?]	Kevin makes proposal that Bui has not posted in a while and has a specialty in speaking.		
13	<b>Bui:</b> Kevin, I am practicing my reading skill ⇒)	Bui makes an alteration of project regarding line 11: “I am doing something: practicing reading skill”	Bui makes a proposal to Kevin: “Kevin is not practicing reading skill” (retroactively determined from line 20). (Does not respond to line 13)	
14	<b>Maria:</b> ⇒) Bui	Maria is in full compliance of line 13.		
15	<b>Maria:</b> reading comprehension	Maria makes an alteration of project regarding line 11: “Bui isn’t practicing reading skill, but comprehension—something more sophisticated.”	(Does not respond to line 13)	
17	<b>Bui:</b> Maria, there is no reading comprehension questions though ⇒)	Bui makes a declination of the project and disagrees with Maria’s line 15.	(Does not respond to line 13)	
19	<b>Maria:</b> ⇒), Bui, I’ll make them for you	Maria makes an alteration of project regarding line 15	(Does not respond to line 13)	Maria makes a proposal that she is some form of “authority” or teacher so that she can make reading comprehension questions.
20	<b>Kevin:</b> well, I’m learning too!! (Tongue-sticking-out emoticon)	Kevin is in full compliance with Bui in line 13.	Kevin makes a declination of the project to counter Bui’s positioning of Kevin in line 13.	
22	<b>Bui:</b> Maria, yes/no questions please ⇒)	Bui is in full compliance with line 15		Bui is in full compliance with line 19.

*Figure 2.* Vignette 2 transcript and joint projects that position Bui, Kevin, and Maria.

In Vignette 2, there were three joint projects that occurred: (1) Bui as one who practices reading, (2) Kevin as one who is not practicing reading but eventually is learning, and (3) Maria as an authority to make reading comprehension questions. The first joint project was in full compliance and altered multiple times to show that Bui is indeed practicing reading skill, but also practicing reading comprehension, and eventually learning. The second joint project of Kevin as one who is not practicing reading was retroactively determined, but eventually declined by Kevin, saying that Kevin was indeed learning. The

third joint project of Maria was in full compliance as Bui requested only yes or no questions from her—someone who is qualified to offer such questions.

## DISCUSSION

Research has suggested that CMC enhances the positive identity development of ESOL learners, but less is known about the linguistic mechanisms through which identity can be formed. In the present study, we highlighted how participants' words in online chat may affirm their learning of English and sense of becoming competent students through the use of discourse and joint projects. From previous research, identifying as a student was the most frequent type of identity that was indexed by Chen (2013) in her examination of multilingual writers in social networks. Therefore, we first examined how prevalent this linguistic occurrence appeared in our data. The frequency of positioning statements in regards to language learning and SLA was notably low. One reason for this scarcity may be that participants may have already developed a mutual belief that they were competent language learners, so they did not need to position one another explicitly in their dialogue. Perhaps the chat room itself was implicitly understood to be helpful for improving their English, so it was not a relevant issue to discuss with others. ESOL chat members may have been more interested in finding out about other cultures, personal lives, and stories rather than topics explicitly related to language learning and their identity associated with their second language.

Previous research has supported the motivating aspects of computer-mediated, intercultural exchange with overseas peers and the possibility of a second language being the medium for this exchange. (Freiermuth & Huang, 2012; 2015). Another explanation for the infrequency of identity-positioning statements comes from the social identity theory or a type of group loyalty (Lea & Spears, 1992). When group membership is salient, de-individuation occurs, which may have led to a shortage of identity-related statements towards the self (a focus on the group, and not the individual).

Although such positioning statements were rare, we took an in-depth approach of examining when they did occur to investigate the nature of these joint projects. Looking at the online conversations, we investigated how these positioning statement joint projects may have been an underlying mechanism to develop ESL learner identity, even in small, but perhaps potent doses. We posit that the chat participants were building up their identity towards learning: Bui and Kevin as learners of English engaged in reading comprehension and Maria as an English language learner competent enough to assess reading comprehension.

In Vignette 1, the learners debated whether speaking Spanglish should be acceptable due to its comprehension difficulty in the chat room. Bui responded by assuring Maria that the use of both languages was acceptable in blended form. This interaction was aligned with the findings from previous research on the safe environment created through online discourse (Lam, 2004b). We argue that this sense of safety may arise through discourse from fellow chatters as they position one another as welcomed to learn English regardless of their competence. The joint project was followed by another occurrence of positioning: Kevin proposing that he understands English better than Spanglish, which is responded to in full compliance by Leon. Similar to previous research, this joint project suggested how online learners may enjoy the mutual exchange of shared feelings and goals towards learning English (Spiliotopoulos & Carey, 2005). Together, Kevin and Leon were affirming to each other their affinity towards English, and arguably, jointly positioning their identities as language learners.

In Vignette 2, Bui described himself as a learner who is improving his reading skills. This positioning statement was in compliance with Maria as she agreed that he was a good student and even suggested through an alteration that what he was actually doing is more sophisticated—reading “comprehension.” The turns taken in Vignette 2 built a progression in Bui's positioning through the joint projects regarding Bui's type of activity, content of activity, and status of educational effort. Figure 3 provides three parallel

processes in the joint project of positioning Bui. He is not only positioned as someone who is practicing his reading skill, but also engaged in a sophisticated, complex level of reading comprehension and, ultimately, learning. His identity was no longer one of putting in no effort and not speaking, as positioned in the beginning of the conversation, but it was re-positioned, altered from just doing a simple activity of practicing reading skill. Bui's identity as a learner was consistently identified as more sophisticated and meaningful across joint projects, in a process called *micro-thickening* (Wortham, 2004). Participating in this chat room was positioned and agreed upon to be sophisticated learning. Similarly, Bui was implicitly labeled and positioned as an advanced learner, and applied the same identity to himself as he was in full compliance with the negotiated joint projects, indicating a personal stake in how he was being positioned. Joint projects such as this one may bolster an ESOL student's identity as an English learner.

Line	Turn Taken	Positioning on Activity	Positioning on Content	Positioning on Status of Effort
11	<b>Kevin:</b> where are Bui... silent, is not your spatiality? [silence, is it not your specialty?]	NOT SPEAKING		NO EFFORT
		↓		↓
		↓		↓
		PRACTICING	READING SKILL	SIMPLE EFFORT
13	<b>Bui:</b> Kevin, I am practicing my reading skill =)	↓	↓	↓
		↓	↓	↓
14	<b>Maria:</b> =) Bui	↓	↓	↓
		↓	↓	↓
15	<b>Maria:</b> reading comprehension	↓	↓	↓
		"SOPHISTICATED"	READING COMPREHENSION	COMPLEX EFFORT
17	<b>Bui:</b> Maria, there is no reading comprehension questions though =)	↓		
		↓		
19	<b>Maria:</b> =), Bui, I'll make them for you	↓		
		↓		
20	<b>Kevin:</b> well, I'm learning too!! (tongue-sticking-out emoticon)	↓		
		↓		
		LEARNING		
22	<b>Bui:</b> Maria, yes/no questions please =)			

Figure 3. The joint project of positioning Bui.

We argue that the positioning process of aforementioned identities in Vignette 2 may represent how Kramsch et al. (2000) described her participants as blurring the boundary lines of their social identity. We also observed how the online environment affords opportunities for role-play, self-authorship, and creating of a fictional self. However, in our study, learners were creating selves positioned positively to learn English. We extended these findings by examining how identity authorship is not exclusively occurring within the self, but is being socially constructed by other online participants within joint projects of mutually taking up their positioning proposals.

In sum, the online participants were establishing understanding of what they were being positioned as and responding to these joint projects. In this mutual belief of their positioning, peers can potentially build up one another's identities as confident learners of English. These two vignettes highlight the uptake of positioning statements, but what is it about the CMC environment that affords this positioning?

A set of explanations comes from the willingness to communicate (WTC) literature. For example, Freiermuth and Jarrell (2006) provided a number of reasons that increase WTC including congenial

environments, opportunities to express their opinions, greater self-confidence and affiliation, reduced anxiety, and relationships that share common background knowledge and seem equitable and intimate. We contend that the CMC context with enhanced WTC is the fertile ground for the kinds of positioning statements that we observed in our data. Perhaps because of increased affiliation and self-confidence among chatters (i.e., Maria and Bui), participants were more willing to identify themselves and each other using identity-positioning statements.

Another possible explanation stems from Kramsch et al. (2000) and the notions of authorship facilitated through the online environment. According to social identity theory (Lea & Spears, 1992), when group membership is made salient, positive characteristics of the group are conferred upon individual members, and individuals adopt the group's identity and norms. Perhaps individuals in our study sensed a positive group membership as online learners of English, and began to adopt such identities for themselves and discuss aspects of these identities. In online chat, members may feel comfortable to affirm one another as competent language learners. Moreover, participants may have developed camaraderie with one another and in that shared identity, positioned one another as allies.

Furthermore, compared to face-to-face communication, CMC has been associated with higher levels of private self-awareness and lower levels of public self-awareness (Matheson & Zanna, 1988). Private self-awareness refers to covert aspects of the self such as personal feelings, beliefs, and values, whereas public self-awareness involves overt aspects of the self that are sensitive to attention and evaluation by others. The pattern we observed in our data perhaps reflects this trend, as the chat participants' use of positioning statements seemed to target their sense of private self-awareness. These reasons extend the growing literature on motivating qualities of online chat.

Some limitations to the study involve determining accurate meanings in online conversations. It was difficult to isolate a single meaning or interpretation while analyzing the language because the interpretation depended largely on conversational context. Another difficulty was the lack of online co-presence, leading to uncertainty about whether proposals were taken up or not. Cues of uptake and common ground in face-to-face conversation were lost—a hurdle in CMC discourse analysis. In addition, further details about the participants were unavailable to provide a more complete understanding of the participants as well as the opportunity for member checking. Future considerations for research involve case studies in ESOL classrooms that engage in online chat. Accompanied with interviews and comparative analyses of classroom conversations, future studies may triangulate results from the classroom, online interactions, and self-report measures.

## CONCLUSION

Does ESOL learner identity get positioned in online chat contexts and, if so, how often and by what mechanism? What is the nature of identity positioning and how is it affirmed in online conversations? Our study provides some answers to these questions through a quantitative assessment of the prevalence of positioning statements and a qualitative look at two conversation vignettes in select online chat transcripts. We found that 2% of turns reflected instances of positioning, but despite its low prevalence, two in-depth analyses of case examples uncovered the nature of positioning and the powerful ways learner identity was discussed and grounded. In both vignettes, we observed the positioning of chat participants' linguistic characteristics and competencies. In Vignette 1, the use of Spanglish and English and their respective users were positioned and discussed in a series of joint projects. In Vignette 2, chat participants positioned themselves and one another as active language students who practice, learn, and help others learn English. Together, these vignettes painted a vivid picture of how learner identity was positioned and taken up by chat room participants.

Additionally, our study applies an analytic framework and uses case examples to better understand how identity is positioned online for ESOL learners. Methodologically, we provide an approach to identity

positioning using joint projects, which can be used to describe intersubjectivity in other contexts. Our findings also suggest the use of CMC fosters identity development for language learners. Although our study was not directly linked with a formal language learning education context such as an ESL classroom, we believe that our analysis has relevance for language instructors as they might incorporate online chat into their pedagogy. One classroom application entails language learners reflecting upon their experience and particular episodes of online discourse. As students consider the discourse of their learning process as they engage in chat, this may bolster their sense of identity towards language learning. It is important to note that the potential threat of negative statements to tear down one's identity remains, and we encourage caution in wisely implementing online chat with language learners. However, despite such a warning, findings from our study support how online chat sessions may foster positive identity development within and beyond the classroom.

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